

Cottage last stop before liftoff

Quiet beach house astronauts' refuge before missions

By Kelly Young
Florida Today

On the deserted beach at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., sits an unremarkable two-story house. The second floor is painted gray, the bottom is white concrete blocks. A wooden deck leads from upstairs to the pristine white sand below.

"It's just like a regular little beach house, it's nothing special," says astronaut Piers Sellers.

But what makes the place special is not grand architecture or amenities. It's all about who's been here. Most of America's space explorers, from Apollo to the space station, probably passed through its doors just before leaving Earth.

"It does have the ghosts of the whole past in it," says Atlantis astronaut Dave Wolf, who spent a few hours there before being blasted into space to live on the Russian space station Mir for 119 days. "In fact it looks like the furniture's out of *I Dream of Jeannie*."

This isolated house - known colloquially as the Beach House - is the last place America's astronauts get to say good-bye to their families before embarking upon dangerous million-mile voyages.

"It's where everybody has that last few moments with their spouse," former space station resident Dan Bursch says. "It's the last time I saw my wife for 6 1/2 months. So the experiences that you have there are burned into your memory."

For years before a launch, astronauts spend their days sitting in simulators, water tanks and classrooms. On the beach, the explorers can stop training and have a few final hours of quiet contemplation to consider the incredible journey they're about to make and how few people get that chance.

"The beach house is a great refuge during a tense time where you can go and be away from the institutionalized environment and spend a little time at peace on a beach near the ocean," Mr. Wolf says.

Before every launch, astronauts and their spouses are treated to a barbecue or picnic with some space workers. After about an hour, those people leave and the astronauts are left alone with their spouses. There used to be two bedrooms in the beach house before it was remodeled in the past decade.

Children under 18 typically aren't allowed at the beach house because the astronauts are under quarantine by the time they arrive at Kennedy. Even their spouses must undergo a physical examination so NASA doctors can make sure they won't pass a cold to the astronauts.

The area is off-limits to the public. The wide strip of empty white sand in front of the house stretches beyond the limits of the eyes.

"The nice thing is, you step out on the porch, you look left and look right, and there's nothing there," Mr. Sellers says. "It's just beach, and a few pads off in the distance, a few launch pads."

The house is between the launch pads for the Air Force's newest rockets, the Atlas 5 and Delta 4.

The house itself was built in 1962 as part of the Neptune Beach Subdivision. NASA bought the land

a year later for \$31,500. Then, it was called the Astronaut Training and Rehabilitation Building. Now, its proper moniker is the Kennedy Space Center Conference Center.

NASA has remodeled the building to modernize it and made it more functional. What remains is devoid of personality. The old red exterior has been repainted to its current gray hue. It's been transformed inside to look like so many other office spaces on the Kennedy Space Center property.

The agency turned the upstairs bedrooms into a conference room with tables, configured in a U shape, with a coffeepot and water cooler in arm's reach.

Downstairs, an overhead projector, fax machine, copier and easels stand near an L-shaped couch that would make perfect decor for a tropical hotel. Pictures of shuttle launches adorn the walls.

NASA personnel can reserve the house for a meeting even though astronauts still stop by when they fly into town. If there are launch delays, the astronauts get some extra time at the beach house.

The most noticeable sign of the cottage's lore is a collection of wine bottles, sitting on the fireplace mantle and stashed away in a corner glass cabinet. The wine labels are sometimes replaced by mission patches. Astronauts signed their names in gold pen. A Russian cognac bottle and a couple bottles of Bud Light are part of the collection.

Obvious signs aren't necessary for the astronauts, who in the quiet here feel the excitement of the impending launch and the presence of the space pioneers who came to this spot before them.

"The psychic energy is kind of incredible," says Pam Melroy, a pilot on the next shuttle flight. "I think that's kind of neat, too. It's also historical in that respect, when you know that all of those people have gone through it before, and they've come out the other side, and I think it makes it into a special place for us.

"But the best part really is being able to walk along the beach, because I think seeing the ocean satisfies some part of you that, you are seeing the earth, and you know you're going to miss it, and it's really special, but somehow the giantness of the ocean makes you feel like it's all part of space too. So it seems like it's a perfect place to get you ready to go."

Chris Kridler and John Kelly of Florida Today also contributed to this story.